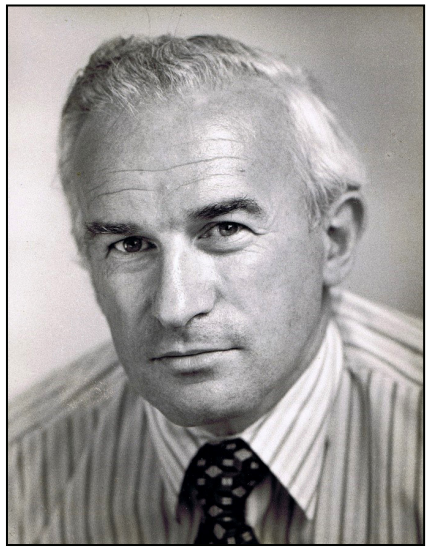
Journalism as a weapon
The life of Patrick John Booth

Obituary: Many countries have their Watergate moment, a scandal that envelopes not only mystery, intrigue, and human tragedy, but also something bigger, some kind of challenge to a country's deepest beliefs about itself. What the US journalism scholar Michael Schudson called a country's central moral values. For New Zealand, a good case could be made that our Watergate moment was the Thomas case. Like Watergate, it revealed ugly truths about corruption within some of our most respected institutions, and investigative journalism played a central role. Like Watergate, it was also a collective loss of innocence, and opened a very deep wound.



AUCKLAND STAR

Figure 1: Patrick John Booth in the early 1970s.

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MANY countries have their Watergate moment, a scandal that envelopes not only mystery, intrigue, and human tragedy, but also something bigger, some kind of challenge to a country's deepest beliefs about itself. What the US journalism scholar Michael Schudson called a country's central moral values (Schudson, 2004).

For New Zealand, a good case could be made that our Watergate moment was the Thomas case. Like Watergate, it revealed ugly truths about corruption within some of our most respected institutions, and investigative journalism played a central role. Like Watergate, it was also a collective loss of innocence, and opened a very deep wound.

That wound opened on or about 17 June 1970, when a person or persons unknown shot dead Harvey and Jeannette Crewe on their farm in the Waikato. Their 18-month-old daughter, Rochelle was found in the house, dehydrated and dirty, but otherwise well, five days later. The case was national news from day one, and police pressure to find the killer or killers was intense.

FRED FREEMAN/*AUCKLAND STAR*

Figure 2: Booth with Arthur Thomas after his release from prison.

After some months, a local farmer, Arthur Allan Thomas, was convicted of the murders. Thomas maintained his innocence, backed by a strong family and group of supporters. Among these was his wife, Vivien, who testified he was with her on the night of the murders. Eventually enough new evidence was gathered to convince the Crown of the need for a retrial.

The story of how Booth became involved in the Thomas saga, after attending the retrial of Arthur Allan Thomas, is best told in his own words, in his memoir *Deadline: My Story* (Booth, 1997). It is worth reading as a case study in what makes a successful investigative journalist. Booth began his investigation as a professional journalist; what he saw and heard turned him into something else: a campaigner, an investigator, a crusader even. All things that decades in the conservative world of New Zealand newspapers would have counselled against. It set him on a path that was to end only eight years later, when Thomas was pardoned, largely as a result of the evidence Booth and others had gathered. Booth's work set a new standard for investigative journalism in New Zealand; it involved forensic exactitude and attention to detail with all the wily street-craft of a long-time pavement hound, and the persistence required to keep him going for eight years in the face of intense police pressure. More than that, it demonstrated a level of political guile that enabled him to swing the ear of a Prime Minister, to outwit the combined might of the police and justice establishments. It was an achievement that makes him, in my view, arguably the finest investigative journalist New Zealand has produced.

Booth spent most of his early life in Hawera, a small dairy town at the arse-end of Taranaki. Boring and flat it might appear to outsiders, but there must be something in the air there, a whiff of mystery that gives blood and breath to crime writers. For it has produced the two writers who have delved deepest into the dark pools of New Zealand crime. One, Ronald Hugh Morrieson, is arguably the country's greatest noir fiction writer—his sex-sodden tales of murder and corruption in the fictional towns of Klyham and Harperton, were black comic masterpieces and a unique local twist on American southern gothic. The other, albeit in the non-fiction genre, is Booth.

Strangely, although both lived in Hawera in the 1940s, by Booth's account, they might as well have lived in different countries. Morrieson's Hawera was one of wild drunken orgies, revving V8s, gunshots and sex. Morrieson died at 50, a bachelor alcoholic, without seeing his novels gain the fame they deserved. Booth, a lifetime teetotaller, grew up in a poor but loving Catholic family, with a rich tradition of music and a love of literature. He was disdainful of Morrieson's picture of Hawera: 'The guys with all the impact had three-speed sports bikes', not throbbing V8s (Booth, 1997, p. 14).

Booth probably would not have appreciated the comparison, but there are more than a few similarities between them. Both were gifted writers, both had an empathy for the outsider, or underdog, both were sceptical, often derisory of the New Zealand establishment, and authority in general, and both seemed to relish scraping back the veneer of propriety to show their country what lay beneath. For Morrieson, that was the comic tragedy of small-town life; for Booth it was the more challenging task of proving corruption in the hitherto untouchable New Zealand justice system.

Booth's family came from Scotland, via Ireland. His grandfather emigrated in 1863, and was an alcoholic and abusive; his wife left when Booth's father Fred was 14. As a result, Fred never drank, and neither did Booth. Fred married Booth's mother, Millie, in 1909; three children followed. The last, Patrick John, came 18 years after the first, on 9 September 1929. Booth describes it as a financial disaster for the hard-up family. For much of the Depression years the family traipsed back and forth between Hawera and Wellington as his father sought relief work. They settled permanently in Hawera only in the 1940s. Pat writes fondly of his father, who, despite deafness, and financial hardship, was kind.

Underneath though, were seeds of the rebel, the sympathy for the underdog that were to emerge later in Booth. His father and grandfather plotted to blow up one of the trains bringing Massey's 'Cossacks', or special constables to Wellington to break the 1913 Waterfront Strike. They decided against it when they realised it would kill the train driver and engineer, and settled for stoning the train instead.

One touching scene he recounts is of the regular visits from Wellington of

a mysterious bachelor, known only as 'Jack'. Only years later did he discover that when Fred had registered for poor relief, anonymous food parcels started appearing at their door, and kept coming until no longer needed:

> I never knew just when my parents identified Jack, the government clerk who had processed my father's dole papers, as the source … When 20 years later, Jack lost his job and his reputation close to retirement after some squalid incident in a Wellington public lavatory, he knew where his deserved friends were and he came, noticeably thinner and tense, to spend more time … (Booth, 1997, p. 33).

Booth loved his father, but he adored his mother, and also his sister, Lynda. The 'three musketeers' as they called themselves, seem to have had a very special bond that gave Booth a sense of security and warmth that carried him through life. He writes fondly of the musical evenings in their house, Millie at the piano, Booth and his sister on violin, or singing. It was his bond with Millie that saw him turn to journalism. He had signed up as a teacher trainee, but when she fell ill, he changed his mind and joined the *Hawera Star* instead, so he could be near her.

A love of sport got him sent to Auckland for the Empire Games in 1950, where he wangled a job on *The Auckland Star*. It was there he paid his dues as a reporter; gaining notable scoops such as the first New Zealand interview with Sir Edmund Hillary after his conquest of Everest, and revealing the imminent military intervention in Malaya. After a solid career as a reporter, including time in the Press Gallery, he moved into management. If one could pinpoint a turning point in his life, it would have been 1973. Until that point he had been the professional newspaperman, climbing steadily through the ranks. By 1973, he was assistant editor. He was an able newspaper executive, traveling overseas to learn about new technology, and helping plan the transition to computerisation for the NZ Newspapers stable in the early 1970s. He probably would have made editor, but for a fateful decision one night in April, 1973.

Earlier that year, after considering new evidence, the Crown had ordered a retrial of Arthur Allan Thomas. Booth was intrigued by the case, but as he later put it, more from the point of view of the professional editor. He thought an interview with Thomas might be a coup for the *Star.*

One night, while driving home, he decided to drop in on the Thomas trial, to see if he could get an interview with Thomas. He knew Thomas's counsel, Kevin Ryan, and thought he had an 'in'. With his usual flair for drama, he described how 'destiny' took a hand. As he drove past the High Court, he made a sudden decision. If there were a car park, he would pull in. 'At that moment, a car pulled out to leave a space directly outside the court. Destiny had made a special place for me.' (Booth, 1997, p. 158).

Booth was deeply moved by the scenes in the courtroom that night, as Thomas

was convicted for a second time. 'Give me a lie-detector test!' Thomas cried from the dock, while in the public gallery there was uproar. Booth decided to check for himself the claims of the Thomas family that Arthur was innocent. Arthur's then –wife, Vivien, claimed he was with her on the night of the murders; Booth met her and found her convincing. He then sought the transcripts of the first and second trials, and began what he called a 'straight accounting job' (Booth, P., interview with the author, 2009). The discrepancies he found between the police version of events at each trial disturbed him, and he began checking the evidence himself, by going back to the original witnesses.

One success was showing that a missing bloodstained watch, which a jeweller had sworn Thomas had brought in for repair shortly after the murders, in fact belonged to someone else. Booth found the watch, and its true owner, John Fisher, who revealed the bloodstains were because he had worn it while slaughtering a pig. Fisher also revealed that he had already told this to police, but they had simply ignored him, declined to call him as a witness, and instead claimed the watch was Thomas's.

Booth also disproved the police claim that Thomas had worked on the murder victims' farm, by checking the topdressing contractor's records. Despite these wins, still the police case stood up to repeated challenge in the higher courts. That was because their star exhibit, a cartridge case found in the victims' garden, had been shown conclusively to have been fired by Thomas's .22 rifle. It was that 'garden' cartridge case that kept Thomas locked up, and persuaded juries and Appeal Court judges that he and his wife were lying. As it turned out, it was not the Thomases that were lying, but the police, and it was Booth, in collaboration with Jim Sprott (a scientist and defence witness at the second trial) who proved it.

How did they do it? At the second trial, the defence had challenged the cartridge case. It had done this after a tip from a retired detective, Jack Ritchie. He ran a gun shop in the remote Hawkes Bay town of Dannevirke. Like much of New Zealand, he had been following the case. After reading that bullets found in the victims' heads had a distinctive '8' on their base, he began looking in his stocks for such bullets. He found plenty, fitted into the kind of cartridge case, made by ICI, that police had found in the Crewe's garden. But he also noticed that the 'ICI' letters on the 'garden' case looked different to ICI letters on other cartridge cases he found – the letters on some were noticeably bigger. Crucially, he could not find any cartridge cases with ICI lettering similar to the garden cartridge case, that were also fitted to '8' bullets. That suggested that the '8' bullets used to murder the Crewes could not have been attached to the 'garden' case fired from Thomas's rifle.

Needless to say, the police disputed this, producing an affidavit from ICI that they had never changed their lettering. The jury at the second trial accepted their word, and Thomas was convicted. Booth decided to test this for himself.

He flew to Melbourne with Sprott and went to ICI and the Melbourne Police Forensic Laboratory with photographs of the different cartridge cases with apparently different lettering. Their comparison microscope clearly showed the differences in lettering. ICI were astonished, and after checking their processes, found the cause of the lettering differences. Wear and tear in the stamps that made the letters on the cartridge cases meant the letters were gradually distorting. This had been noticed by an anonymous engraver at the factory, who had then made new stamps, with noticeably different lettering. By checking their records, ICI were able to give a date when the 'garden' case, with its particular style of lettering, had been made. By cross-checking shipping records, and records of the factory that inserted '8' bullets into ICI cases, they were able to prove that the 'garden' case was made after the last '8' bullets were fitted into ICI cases. Thus, the 'garden' case fired from Thomas's rifle could never have held the "8" bullets that killed the Crewes.

That evidence was heard by a Court of Appeal hearing in 1975. Yet, despite agreeing it was now 'improbable' that the garden cartridge case could once have held a murder bullet, the Court refused to rule it out. A later Privy Council hearing was unable to challenge that bizarre finding, on a technicality. The entire New Zealand justice system, supposed to be the last word in robust and critical review, had utterly failed Thomas.

Discouraged, Booth put his files aside. It was only after a visit to the movies, to see the new 1977 Oscar-winner, *All The President's Men*, that he went back to work (Davies, 2018). With all avenues of appeal through the court system exhausted, he turned to politicians. He and others managed to persuade the Prime Minister, Robert Muldoon, to hold a Royal Commission of Inquiry. Muldoon called in an Australian judge specialising in police corruption. After hearing all the evidence, it had this to say:

> That a man is locked up for a day without cause has always been seen by our law as a most serious assault on his rights. That a man is wrongly imprisoned on the basis of evidence which is false to the knowledge of police officers whose duty it is to uphold the law is an unspeakable outrage. … Mr Thomas suffered that outrage; he was the victim of that attack. His courage and that of a few very dedicated men and women who believed in the cause of justice has exposed the wrongs that were done. They can never be put right. (NZ Government, 1980)

The Commission also noted the 'immense labour of Mr Patrick Booth in the field of investigative journalism'. On the Commission's recommendation, the government pardoned Thomas, and paid him $1 million compensation for wrongful imprisonment.

Looking back, it is easy to underestimate the determination Booth showed,

especially after the failure of the courts to challenge the police lies. There was no precedent; no one had ever shown the police to be corrupt. Like Watergate, his investigation plucked scales from our eyes, and showed us things that most New Zealanders had not imagined some police were capable of.

Booth likes to outsource his decision to take on the case to destiny, but there had been hints that something inside him was itching. There was the strange sidestep to take on the editorship of the Catholic newspaper, *Zealandia*, in 1971, before he returned to the *Star* as assistant editor, in 1972. In the late 1960s he had also spent time on newspapers in Sydney, Australia, but soon returned to the *Star*. There was clearly some part of him that was never comfortable too far from the typewriter. Many *Star* staff have stories of him wanting to help write their stories, or taking them over. While an able manager, his heart was never in it in the way it was in writing about social justice.

His personal life was changing at that time, too. He had recently fallen for a reporter in the *Star* newsroom, Valerie Davies, who had arrived from Hong Kong with her two children. Booth moved into her flat in Parnell, leaving his wife (also Valerie) and their four children. It was while driving back to Davies' flat that he made that fateful decision; there must have been a lot of strong emotions already swirling within him when, as he says, destiny beckoned him. Inside Booth the newspaper executive was Booth the campaigner, waiting for the right cause. As it turned out, that cause was Thomas.

Davies, who became his second wife and lifetime companion, remembers him as very conscientious about accuracy, whether as a reporter, or an editor.

'He had this calm, capable energy. He never really made anybody feel a lesser person. A lot of people would say what an ego he had, but he always made other people feel good.' Davies and Booth moved in together just before Booth became embroiled in the Thomas case.

> It's only in retrospect I realise what a huge impact it had on us and the children. They were going to school in a country area where most of the farmers thought it was a jolly good thing that someone had been clapped in prison.
>
> We were totally committed to what he was doing. Looking back it was a huge bonding exercise. (Davies, interview with the author, 2018)

Davies' daughter, Victoria Carter, also remembers it vividly.

> Every night we would talk about what he was working on. He would drive us to school in the morning and talk news … the news was part of our lives.
>
> The Thomas case was such a part of our family lives that when Pat went to visit Arthur at Paremoremo [maximum security prison] the whole family went along. On one trip I took [Arthur] a big tortoiseshell

> sea shell, because I wanted him to hear the sea. (Carter, interview with the author, 2018)

Booth was under police surveillance during the case, as police desperately fought to shore up their crumbling case against Thomas. They believed their phone was tapped, and one night, Davies and Booth woke to find a man standing in their room, in a grey suit with a black stocking over his head, and had to chase him out. They were convinced it was a detective searching for evidence.

Davies believes that the Thomas case was his finest work.

> It's not only establishing the innocence of a wrongly imprisoned man but it caused people to look a lot harder at the justice system. It was very interesting how afterwards we would hear back from people on juries 'Look, remember the Thomas case.'
>
> Those were the things he really cared about - uncovering injustice and bringing it to the notice of someone who wanted to do something about it.
>
> He had this tremendous sense of justice. He had huge integrity. He would never have breached the unwritten journalistic code. He would never have betrayed a confidence. So people trusted him. He was an honest man.
>
> His passion for justice and his honesty were his main qualities. But [he was also] incredibly courteous and sensitive to other people … and a brilliant mediator. (Davies, 2018)

Therese Hodgson, his second daughter from his first marriage, also believes he will be most remembered for the Thomas case.

> He had very high principles around journalism and he was really old school and he was very proud of those … as well.
>
> [But] he also had a very dry sense of humour. He was very quick witted. He was a wonderful dad. (Hodgson)

The Thomas case, if his best work, was by no means his only achievement. As the deputy editor of *The Auckland Star* through the 1970s, he helped foster a newsroom that became legendary for its story-breaking dynamism, attracting and fostering journalists who dug deeper and harder.

Under Booth, the *Star* broke many major stories; the Mr Asia drugs ring, which first alerted New Zealand to the scourge of heroin trafficking, the Dawn Raids, which showed us the ugly face of racist policing of illegal migrants from the Pacific, and the Erebus scandal, which revealed the cover-up of the cause of New Zealand's worst air disaster. Perhaps more importantly than all these, Booth's newsroom fostered many of the brilliant journalists of the next generation; Donna Chisholm, Jim Tully, Warwick Roger, Warren Berryman, David McLoughlin were just some who developed at the *Star*. The *Star* also dominated

the Qantas Awards—with several journalist of the year award winners from its stable. Booth could be autocratic, and was sometimes accused of claiming more credit than was his due for work done by his teams. But there was no doubting his ability to inspire, to encourage, to lead. He was bold, trying new things, such as pioneering multipart features on the emerging trends such as the Pacific influx, and the rise of violence. He loved being in the newsroom, and loved a strong story, the more controversial the better.

Above all, he had an empathy for the underdog, the outsider. When Muldoon publicised a list of supposed members of the Moscow-leaning Socialist Unity Party, the *Star* under Booth was the only newspaper which refused to publish it. He became firm friends with Bill Sutch, the civil servant arrested after meeting a KGB agent at night. Booth stood by Sutch before and after he was found not guilty of offences against the *Official Secrets Act.* That empathy for the outsider underpinned some of his inspirational news choices—above all his decision to bet his career on accused double-murderer Arthur Thomas. Unlike all the work at the *Star*, which was really no more than his job, albeit done well, the Thomas work was done in his own time.

Booth finally retired from journalism in 2004. He then turned to local body politics, serving three terms on two district health boards, and on six other local bodies. He was also a prolific author, writing four novels, four biographies, an autobiography, and three sports books. His last work, unfinished, was a monumental history of New Zealand's role in the Pacific War. One of his many campaigns was to get recognition for the 17 New Zealand coastwatchers beheaded by Japanese forces on the island of Betio (in modern day Kiribati) in October 1942.

He collected numerous awards, including an OBE for services to journalism, race relations, local government, health and literature; the Jubilee Prize for Investigative Journalism, in 1974 (for his work on the Thomas case), a Qantas Lifetime Achievement Award in 2002 and a National Press Club Lifetime Achievement Award in 2005 (previously awarded only to Sir Geoffrey Cox, Sir Terry McLean, and Peter Arnett). (Booth, P: Biographical Notes, 2017)

For Booth, though, none of that mattered as much as the wrongs he helped right. In notes found on his desk after he died, he listed his proudest achievement. It was not the myriad investigations, books, or awards. It was a small, relatively obscure campaign run while he was editor of community newspapers in Auckland. After publishing stories about glue ear causing deafness in children, making them more likely to drop out of school and end up in jail, he got suburban newspapers to donate all money raised from its annual Round the Bays run to fund treatment for all children in the Counties-Manukau area, wiping out its waiting list in two weeks. Underneath this achievement, he wrote:

> Used journalism as a weapon for truth, justice, and righting social wrongs.
> (Booth, P.: Biographical notes, 2017)

At his funeral, an elderly man came forward to put a flower on his coffin. It was Arthur Thomas, who had driven north from his farm in Waikato to say farewell to the man who, perhaps more than any other, had given him back his freedom. Thomas does not give many interviews these days, but he agreed to be interviewed for this obituary. He was, he said, very very grateful to Booth.

> I just said, 'thank you Pat'. I couldn't say too much. I wanted to say he did a bloody great job, but I couldn't find the words.
>
> I told my family, there was no better. He got stuck in, like a dog with a bone.
>
> He did it for all of us. He was a bloody great man. (Thomas, interview with the author, 2018)

Booth spent his last couple of years in a retirement village in Kumeu. After a sudden decline, he passed away on 31 January 2018. He is survived by his first wife, Valerie Hollard (*nee* Lineen, then Valerie Booth) and their children, Grant, Therese, Mark, Sally, and his second wife Valerie Davies, and her children, Victoria and James.

Patrick John Booth, b. September 9, 1929, Levin. Married Valerie Lineen (now Hollard) 1953: Grant, Therese, Mark, Sally. Married Valerie Davies 1975. Died 31 January 2018 at Kumeu, Auckland.

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